



## **Learner-Centered Mentoring Building from Student Teachers' Individual Needs and Experiences as Novice Practitioners**

**Joni S. Kolman, Rachel Roegman, & A. Lin Goodwin**

Prevailing teacher education reform initiatives call for preservice preparation to be “clinically rich”—shifting the primary locus, and therefore location, of learning from within university walls to schools (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010; New York State Department of Education, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2009, 2011). This shift places increasing responsibility for teacher preparation on the cooperating teacher (henceforth, mentor teacher; MT) and heightens the urgency for preparation programs to partner with effective classroom practitioners who can mentor teacher candidates (for a full discussion of the term *cooperating teacher*, see Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014).

Identifying effective MTs can be challenging because good teachers of children are not necessarily effective MTs (Clarke et al., 2014; Graham, 2006; Koerner, Rust, & Baumgartner, 2002; Leshem, 2009; Wang, 2001). While MTs play many crucial

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Joni S. Kolman is an assistant professor in the School of Education of the College of Education, Health, and Human Services at California State University San Marcos. Rachel Roegman is an assistant professor of educational studies in the School of Education at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana. A. Lin Goodwin is the Evenden Professor of Education and vice dean of Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York. Email addresses: jkolman@csusm.edu, rroegman@purdue.edu, & alg@tc.columbia.edu

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roles in preparing preservice teachers, research has suggested that their focus remains primarily on pupils (Clarke et al., 2014; Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2011) and has highlighted the conflicts that often arise between the very different needs of students and teacher candidates (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005; Clarke et al., 2014; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985; Graham, 2006; Rajuan, Beijgaard, & Verloop, 2007). This is particularly true in high-accountability school environments where there are serious consequences for poor student achievement and little leeway for error or experimentation (Anderson & Stillman, 2010).

Our exploratory study documents the practices of a group of MTs in high-need schools within a high-accountability district. These MTs support teacher candidates, called residents, in an urban teacher residency program. Our primary research question—what are the mentoring practices of a group of strong MTs?—led us not only to examine the practices of these MTs but to consider the extent to which they purposefully met the learning needs of their mentees.

In this article, we describe and illustrate what we term *learner-centered mentoring*, a conceptual notion that emerges from our initial examination of the data. We use the descriptor “learner-centered” to highlight parallels between these mentors’ practices and the tenets of learner-centered pedagogy described by educators and theorists, including John Dewey (1938, 1956), Maxine Greene (1978, 1984), Lev Vygotsky (1978), Lillian Weber (1974), and Deborah Meier (1995). Some of these tenets include a focus on the learner’s needs, readiness, and purposes for learning; understanding the learner within a developmental trajectory; providing conditions for learner development and autonomy; and positioning the teacher as learner, observer, and supporter. Learner-centered educators—and mentors—also draw on their observations of each learner (Schiro, 2013) to develop curricula and experiences meant to foster individual growth. In many ways, the practices of the majority of the MTs in this study reflect what Clandinin (2000) has called “teacher education concerned with teacher knowledge” (p. 29) and Lave and Wenger (1991) have described as “situated learning.” Learner-centered mentoring begins with the knowledge and skills the teacher candidate brings to the classroom, and learning occurs through experiences in the classroom made available by the MT. In so doing, we aim to illuminate a conception of mentoring *of* and *for* preservice teachers in ways that can support teacher preparation programs and host K–12 schools in strengthening MT development.

## **Effective Mentoring in Preservice Teacher Preparation**

A considerable body of empirical research has reiterated the general sentiment that MTs play a critical role in developing teacher candidates’ skills, knowledge, and dispositions. A portion of this research examines effective MT “inputs”—the characteristics and skills that they bring to the role. For instance, several studies

have concluded that good MTs are reflective practitioners (Boreen, Johnson, Niday, & Potts, 2000; Cherian, 2007), work effectively with colleagues (Boreen et al., 2000), maintain a passion for teaching children (Boreen et al., 2000; Graham, 2006; Osunde, 1996), and hold a view of learning to teach that is focused on pupils (Feiman-Nemser & Carver, 2012; Gardiner, 2011). In addition, these studies suggested that effective MTs have extensive experience teaching children (Killian & Wilkins, 2009) along with preparation as a mentor (Clarke et al., 2014; Killian & Wilkins, 2009). Indeed, a lack of mentor preparation has been cited as leading to ineffective mentoring (Clarke, 2001; Gardiner, 2011; Giebelhaus & Bowman, 2002). These studies highlighted dispositions and professional development opportunities on which programs may draw as they select and prepare MTs.

A more significant body of research has considered MTs' work in interaction with teacher candidates—what Clarke et al. (2014) described as MTs' "participation" in teacher education. Indeed, the research has reflected a particular interest in the many roles that MTs play in preparation (Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Clarke et al., 2014; Koc, 2012; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Rozelle & Wilson, 2012; Wang & Odell, 2002; Young, Bullough, Draper, Smith, & Erickson, 2005), particularly around the relational components and mentoring around teaching practice.

Mentoring is a relational process, and thus researchers have also examined the "affective tone" (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985, p. 256) in the roles and effectiveness of MTs. Many studies have highlighted that both MTs and teacher candidates see a personal and caring relationship as crucial for an effective student teaching experience (Clarke, 2006; Glenn, 2006; Fairbanks, Freedman, & Kahn, 2000). Part of this relationship involves the MT providing a warm and friendly environment as well as emotional support throughout the clinical experience (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Maynard, 1996) and developing mutual trust with the teacher candidate (Stanulis & Russell, 2000). These relational components, however, can be an impediment to teacher candidates receiving constructive, and sometimes critical, feedback on their practice from their mentors.

The topics and means of providing feedback to teacher candidates are other widely explored aspects of mentoring (e.g., Chalias, Ria, Bertone, Trohel, & Durand, 2005; Crasborn et al., 2011; Graham, 2006; Kahan, Sinclair, Saucier, & Caiozzi, 2003; Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005; Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009). Similar to others, Valencia et al. found that MT feedback focused generally and primarily on aspects of management and curriculum, even when the teacher candidate already demonstrated success in those areas. This approach appears to be related to a desire for everyone to get along (Abell, Dillon Hopkins, McIerney, & O'Brien, 1995; Kahan et al., 2003; Leshem, 2009; Rozelle & Wilson, 2012; Russell & Russell, 2011) and to maintain a positive mentor–mentee relationship, as opposed to focusing on the learning needs of the teacher candidate.

A predominant role of MTs is to model practice for teacher candidates, and this is a common area of study (e.g., Crasborn et al., 2011; Graham, 2006; Ko-

erner et al., 2002; Osunde, 1996; Rozelle & Wilson, 2012; Sayeski & Paulsen, 2012). Rozelle and Wilson (2012), for example, described a preparation program where MTs were to be observed by their teacher candidates with the explicit goal of accurate reenactment of practice. They concluded with a discussion of which preservice teachers were able to “gain expertise” (p. 1204) in their MTs’ practices and which were not. Graham (2006) similarly explored the modeling and replication dynamic. Her study suggested that *maestros* mentored preservice teachers to be classroom performers by encouraging them to precisely replicate observed practices, with little interpretation of the process; in contrast, *mentors* helped their preservice teachers to deconstruct practice to better understand teacher decision making. The degree to which teacher candidates are expected to mimic observed practices, and the characterization of this as an effective approach to mentoring, varies across this group of studies.

Several of these studies on mentoring of teacher candidates conclude with a call for mentoring to be less generic and more responsive to the teacher candidates’ unique learning needs (e.g., Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2011; Graham, 2006; Valencia et al., 2009); few illustrate how this might look (e.g., Crasborn et al., 2011; Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005; Leatham & Peterson, 2010). Leatham and Peterson’s survey study of secondary MTs, for example, found that while the mentors most often engaged with common approaches (e.g., model, share knowledge, provide experience), they were able to be responsive to individual candidates’ needs by constructing their mentoring conversations around problems of practice. Crasborn and colleagues (e.g., Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2008, 2010; Crasborn et al., 2011; Hennissen et al., 2011) concurred. Their research indicated that teacher candidates engage in more productive conversations with their MTs after preparation in the SMART program, which directs them toward discussion around real-time challenges of learning to teach. In this article, we build upon this work and document practices and dispositions in the mentoring of teacher candidates, called residents, in an urban teacher residency program. In so doing, we illustrate mentoring practices that begin with, and build upon, the needs and readiness of the teacher candidates.

## **Methods**

This study is situated within an urban teacher residency program, funded by a federal Teacher Quality Partnership<sup>1</sup> grant, that prepared new teachers in two shortage areas: teachers of students with disabilities or of students learning English as a new language. Collaborating with the local school district, the university invited principals leading high-need schools to partner with the program.<sup>2</sup> Once principals/schools agreed to participate, they nominated prospective MTs using program criteria (certification area; 3 years minimum of teaching experience; strong teaching; experience with or interest in mentoring). Interested mentors then underwent a selection

process that included an application, observation by program staff, and an interview. The program staff looked for evidence of caring, student-centered classroom practice, passion and commitment when talking about teaching, alignment with program goals and philosophy, and experience collaborating with professional peers.

Alignment with program goals and philosophy was a particularly critical selection criterion given a core program practice of coteaching and coplanning and a philosophical stance that emphasizes inclusive and student-centered teaching practices to achieve educational equity. Thus our close attention to selecting mentors (as well as mentors (s)electing to work with the program) reflects our full awareness that the field of special education is shaped by competing paradigms that define and respond to “disability” quite differently (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012), which in turn dictates how special education teachers are prepared. Similarly, the field of teaching English as a new or second language has also seen paradigm shifts, from behavioristic–cognitive to sociocultural approaches, affecting how language learners and learning are conceptualized (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001). Given these understandings, the program devotes a great deal of time talking to, meeting with, and identifying MTs who evidence like-minded practices and stances and seem ready to be strong collaborators in preparing residents who can be advocates for and responsive educators to all children, regardless of their certification area.

The program was helped in its efforts by a district-wide special education reform initiative, which began with a pilot in 2010 and went to scale in 2012 (Perry & Associates, 2012). The move toward inclusive classrooms, least restrictive settings, and integrated coteaching as a key instructional model meant that teachers in the district, including MTs, were learning about and implementing inclusive, student-centered practices, enabling them to enrich or stretch beyond the boundaries of their experience or prior preparation.

The program uses the term *mentor teachers*, as opposed to *cooperating teachers*, to notate that these educators were expected to provide intensive guidance and teaching to residents, as opposed to just opening their classrooms on a schedule more typical for student teaching experiences. Residents spent the entire year, from September through June, in the same MT’s classroom, 3 days a week in the fall and 4 days a week in the spring semester. Residents were observed by their university supervisors 12–15 times during the year, and triad meetings—with residents, MTs, and supervisors—were held at least twice a year. Each year, approximately 20 residents completed the program, earning a master’s degree and state certification.

In addition to careful selection, the residency program provided ongoing professional development to MTs. The program began with a comprehensive orientation at the start of the year and continued with monthly mentor teacher meetings and twice-yearly retreats that mentors attended with their residents. The conceptual framework of the university, which emphasizes inquiry, curriculum, and social justice, undergirded the program; these tenets, along with the practices of coteaching (for a discussion of coteaching models, see Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain,

& Shamberger, 2010) and active listening, were emphasized throughout the MT's professional development. Thus the overall stance of the program was one that valued collaboration and dialogue, analysis and reflective practice, practitioner inquiry and critical questioning, curriculum making and student centeredness, and advocacy and social action.

Our interest in this work is situated in our shared commitments to urban teacher preparation and understandings of the pivotal role that MTs play. Each of us has played a different role in the program: One of us was solely involved in gathering and managing program documentation for the residency program; two of us were engaged in program implementation generally. We participated in program planning meetings in which residency placements were discussed, but we were not directly responsible for designing or leading the mentor teacher components of the residency program, nor did we serve as supervisors who regularly interacted with MTs around the growth and development of their residents. Two authors shifted institutions prior to, or early in, the study and no longer participate in the program in any way, aside from research. Our external affiliations ensured that data collection and analysis were consistently informed by outside perspectives.

### **Data and Participants**

In this qualitative study, we were particularly interested in the practices of strong mentors who had worked with the residency program for more than 1 year. Thus, to identify participants, we began by using a reputational sampling process (Ladson-Billings, 1994). We gave all members of the teacher residency program team (i.e., supervisors, instructors, program manager) a list of the 15 MTs who had been with the program for more than 1 year<sup>3</sup> and asked them to identify those they deemed effective in their work with residents—using their own understandings of “effective”—and provide a rationale for their decisions. Seven MTs were nominated by more than half of respondents, our threshold for inclusion in the sample. After a survey of data that the program had collected since its inception in 2010–2011, it became clear that we only had sufficient data to explore the mentoring practices of six of the nominated MTs, who ultimately compose the sample for this study (See Table 1). Although small and drawn from a specialized population of MTs working in high-need urban schools, this sample provides a fine-grained look at the practice of mentor teachers.

We draw on multiple vantage points—MTs, residents, and program team members—to develop our emergent understandings of these MTs' mentoring practices (See Figure 1). The MTs' perspectives were drawn from self-assessments and focus groups. Twice a year, at the end of each semester, MTs completed a mentoring self-assessment based on the residency program's seven mentoring standards.<sup>4</sup> These self-assessments asked them to rate their mentoring practice on a scale of 1 (*unacceptable*) to 4 (*exceptional*) for each standard along several performance

indicators, write a rationale for their choices, and respond to open-ended prompts about their mentoring. These standards included MTs' ability to be effective communicators and active listeners; assist, support, and guide residents in professional inquiry; utilize principles of adult learning to foster independence in residents; collaborate with the resident to improve student outcomes; support residents in becoming agents of change and advocates for students; assist residents in applying theory to develop, modify, and implement innovative curricula; and demonstrate high professional standards. At year's end, mentors were also invited to participate

**Table 1**  
**Participant Characteristics**

	<i>Years as teacher prior to mentoring for program</i>	<i>Years of mentoring with program</i>	<i>Certification area(s)</i>	<i>Grade level taught</i>	<i>Subject(s) taught</i>
Heather	3	2011–2012, 2012–2013	special education; literacy	high school	English and math, self-contained for students with autism
Colleen	4	2012–2013, 2013–2014	special education; English	middle school	humanities; English
Brittany	4	2011–2012, 2012–2013, 2013–2014	TESOL	middle school	ESL
Elijah	11	2011–2012, 2012–2013, 2013–2014	TESOL, English, school building leader	high school	English, literature, and journalism, self-contained for English language learners
Blake	3	2012–2013, 2013–2014	special education	high school	English; history
Emma	5	2012–2013, 2013–2014	special education; elementary education	middle school	humanities coteaching; push-in and pull-out support for students with disabilities

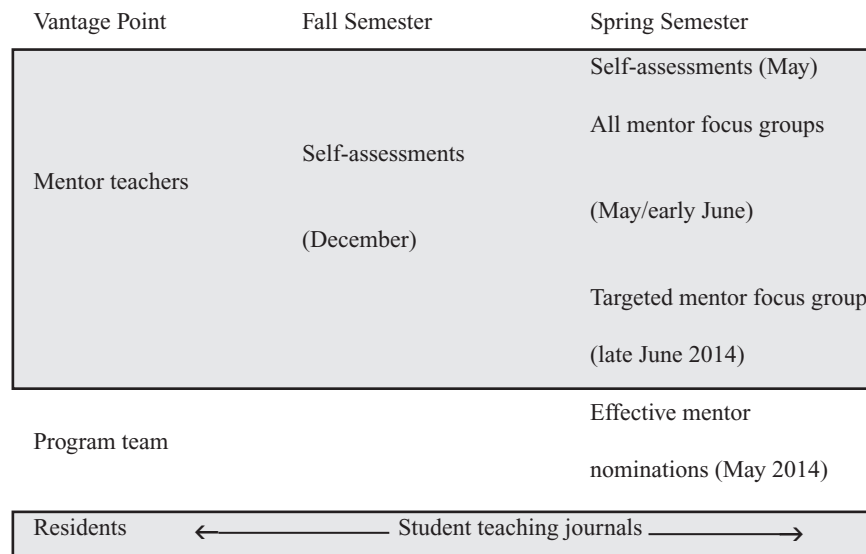
Note. ESL = English as a second language. TESOL = teaching English to speakers of other languages.

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in focus groups with other MTs. These were designed to elicit conversations about their mentoring and how they supported residents' growth and development. For instance, MTs were asked about the fundamental things every new teacher needs to know and be able to do and about the strategies they used to develop their residents in those areas. Focus groups were also used to delve into MTs' decision making around release of classroom/curricular responsibility and how their practice changed due to their work with residents. In addition, we invited the six mentors whom we identified as study participants to a second focus group; two attended. This focus group centered on participants' understanding of effective mentoring with probing for specific examples.

Data on the residents' perspectives of their MTs' practices were drawn from their student teaching journals. Residents were expected to write in their journals twice a month and could choose to write about any aspect of their residency experience. In other words, there were no specific prompts asking them to reflect on the mentoring that they received. During their residency, their university supervisors and the instructors of the student teaching seminar had access to their journals, and the university supervisor wrote a response to each journal entry. For the purposes of this study, our analysis focused on residents' narratives around their MTs excerpted from these journal entries. Admittedly, this is a somewhat limited data source on

**Figure 1**  
***Timeline of annual data collection activities. Aside from the targeted focus group and the nominations, all data collection activities occurred annually.***





residents' perceptions of their mentoring, both because residents elected whether to focus on their MTs' practice and because they were writing for an audience (their supervisor) and might have felt uncomfortable being frank about their experiences. However, these journals offer insight into resident perspectives on MTs' practices. For the most part, our data analysis focused on the MTs' own perspectives, and we drew on these journals as confirming evidence. Future studies would include greater resident voice in this regard.

Last, our data included the rationales for nominations provided by the program team members. Team members completed an electronic survey through Qualtrics to provide their thoughts on why each MT was effective.

### **Analysis**

Our approach to analysis for this study was a "collective interpretive" process (Wasser & Bresler, 1996). Our joint inquiry began with open coding of the data, with each of us analyzing self-assessments and focus group transcripts for all MTs in the sample, noting major themes that described participants' mentoring (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Our initial interest in this data set was around the process, thinking, and practice of becoming an effective mentor teacher, which was the rationale behind focusing on MTs who had been with the residency for at least 2 years. This gave us the opportunity to look at their practice over time, which was one of our initial research questions. We were also interested in ways that their mentoring changed, if at all, in relation to the individual residents whom they mentored.

With this initial focus in mind, but before we engaged in any systematic data analysis, the two authors who conducted the targeted focus group wrote reflective memos. Both authors heard what appeared to be clear distinctions in the mentoring practices between the two participants, with one highlighting her modeling of effective teaching and the other highlighting the types of conversations she engaged in with her various mentee residents. Through our memos and ensuing research team meetings, we looked to the literature to identify a theoretical or conceptual framework to help us understand the potential differences between these two mentors, which led us to the concept of learner-centered teaching. In learner-centered teaching, teachers focus on the needs of their students as learners, and not merely covering specific content (Weimer, 2002). On this basis, we shifted from our initial focus on how continuing mentors developed their practice to our current focus of developing a framework for learner-centered mentoring.

With this new focus, all three authors individually used open coding of the MT self-assessments and the targeted and annual focus groups, focusing on ways that participants described their mentoring. We then met as a team to discuss our codes, ensuring that we had common understanding of what each code meant, and developed pattern codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These pattern codes

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were developed through grouping open-ended codes that shared themes or ideas. For example, the pattern code “opportunities to teach, plan, lead” was developed by combining 42 open codes of mentoring practice, such as “allowing resident to handle situations” and “teaching independently when MT absent.”

As we discussed our coding and developed pattern codes, we also questioned the degree to which participants were engaging in purposeful practice that was responsive to the resident. In other words, we wondered if MTs chose to share authority around specific tasks that they thought individual residents were ready to learn, or whether they share authority around tasks for other reasons, such as avoiding the tediousness of attendance. On this basis, in our next round of coding, each of us recoded the self-assessments and focus group interviews as well as the programmatic data and the student teaching journals, guided by specific analytical questions designed to more specifically target the extent to which MT practices were resident centered. Our first analytical question looked at the degree to which mentors consider their residents’ learning needs, and the second focused on the intentionality and purposes that mentors shared for engaging in various practices. Through an iterative process, we grouped codes conceptually to create axial codes that more concretely described those MT practices that appeared to be resident centered (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process yielded four themes that describe the resident-centered mentoring practice of the participants in this study: showing vulnerability, sharing authority, modeling, and progressive vision. Through analyzing this small set of MTs and their discussion of their mentoring practice, we aim to enrich current conceptions of mentoring of preservice teachers through our development of the concept of learner-centered mentoring.

### **Illustrations of Learner-Centered Mentoring**

We entered this study with a question about the mentoring practices of a group of “effective” MTs. Described in the following subsections are the practices that emerged through our analysis, which we characterize as *learner-centered*—those that begin from the readiness and needs of the resident and involve an intentionally scaffolded process for learning how to teach, rooted in classroom experiences. We begin by describing a practice that sits within the affective realm of mentoring—showing vulnerability—and follow with illustrations of two other practices: sharing authority and modeling. We conclude with a discussion of a fourth theme, *progressive vision*, and its relationship to mentoring practice that is learner centered.

#### **Showing Vulnerability**

The effectiveness of the student teaching experience is often described in terms of the affective aspects of the mentoring relationship (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Clarke, 2006; Glenn, 2006; Fairbanks et al., 2000; Haigh et al., 2006; Stanulis &

Russell, 2000). Creating a strong personal relationship within the clinical dyad, characterized by enduring emotional support and friendliness, has been shown to be supportive of teacher candidates' learning experiences (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). Our data suggest that these positive affective aspects were imbedded in all of these mentoring relationships. Colleen, Elijah, Blake, and Heather, however, went beyond just being positive and welcoming for their residents—our findings suggest that they allowed the concerns raised by residents and shared teaching experiences to serve as catalysts for conversations that revealed the MTs' imperfections as teachers of youth. In revealing their vulnerabilities in this way—allowing residents to see them wrestle with a particular aspect of teaching, such as classroom management, and openly discussing how and why lessons go wrong, based on observations and experiences—they provided learner-centered support that demonstrates “teaching [a]s a daily exercise in vulnerability” (Palmer, 1998, p. 17), an imperfect and evolving craft.

Colleen aptly describes this practice as being “willing to struggle in front of my resident.” In several examples, her resident describes his concerns with effective means of managing the classroom and turning to Colleen with his struggles. In his writing, the resident recognizes that although Colleen is a “seasoned pro,” she too gets frustrated and still must experiment with different avenues for addressing problems that, in the end, may not be solved satisfactorily. Colleen notes that over time, she became more willing to discuss these real challenges with her resident and show him how teaching is made better through a constant cycle of reflection, experimentation, and professional development.

Elijah's resident reports that his vulnerability, while helpful, could also be discouraging. She describes witnessing a lesson led by Elijah that “fopped” and wondering how that could happen when he is so experienced. Speaking afterward, Elijah pointed out the ways in which inadequate planning and unfocused questions led to confusion for the students and spoke at length with her about approaches he might take the next time. Elijah also acknowledged to the resident that even after his many years of teaching, he, too, faced difficulties with management, which she found “simultaneously encouraging and disheartening.” Yet she notes that he is in this with her, and this makes her feel not alone:

Any feedback he gives, feedback I receive, or concerns I have are treated as “we's.” He's said that anything I'm asked to work on or that I need to work on, is something we have to work on, because in many instances he's using what he observes to shape his practice. This is something I've found to be really helpful—feeling supported as I go through this process that is wholly new to me in some ways.

Building from the shared experience of an unsuccessful lesson, and the resident's confusion, provided Elijah the opportunity to be supportive of his resident's fledgling practice through revealing his vulnerabilities as a teacher.

Another example emerged from Heather's description of a specific unit plan

that she developed—letting students choose their own topics for a persuasive writing project—and the difficulty that this choice created for her and her resident:

[Resident] just sat back one day and said, “This is not working.” *[laughter]* And I knew. I’m saying, “They should all be writing the same subject.” And she says, “Yeah.” I’m saying, “Dumb. Dumb, dumb mistake.” But we couldn’t get out of it—[the students] were already into it. And they were all invested in their ideas. So it was just horrible. But we got through it . . . it was hilarious. Because we both knew. It was stupid on my part.

Beginning from this experience of a unit gone awry, Heather’s willingness to be vulnerable meant that her resident learned that even experienced teachers make mistakes. This experience also further built their relationship and the resident’s learning—with the two laughing about the challenging situation and working together to figure out solutions.

As with Heather, Blake appreciated constructive criticism and feedback from his residents and often found himself agreeing when residents pointed out things that were not going well. He wrote of his first experience as an MT with two residents:

It was great to have their perspective in the planning process, their feedback and suggestions after teaching. . . . It was valuable for me to have all these new ideas presented, have another sounding board for my ideas.

These conversations were rooted in their shared teaching experiences, and Blake’s descriptions suggest that teaming around the imperfect process of teaching was mutually beneficial.

It is noteworthy that the residents of the MTs in this study felt positively about their experiences being mentored, despite the imperfections they saw in their MTs’ practice and despite disagreements they and their MTs had about teaching philosophy. One resident, in particular, was critical of the practice of her MT, Emma, who she felt overly emphasized test preparation and did not advocate strongly enough for students in IEP meetings. Despite this, the resident consistently made comments in her student teaching journal along the lines of,

I think it is incredibly important to have strong professional and personal relationships. . . . This is why I feel so lucky to also have Emma, my mentor, who has proven to be such a positive force and support for me.

We suggest that by revealing their vulnerabilities and exposing their own practice for inquiry and reflection, residents are privy to the value of “productive failure” (Kapur, 2008)—mistakes as a way in to learning. When MTs share their shortcomings, they implicitly tell their residents that being a learner and sometimes stumbling are part of what it means to be a teacher. Grounded in shared experiences and concerns raised by residents, this vulnerability becomes learner-centered practice, opening doors for the residents to have conversations with their MTs about challenges and to gain insights into the thinking behind teaching, allowing

for more complex, thoughtful, and considered practice to emerge. In the case of the MTs in this study, this also further built the foundation of trust and welcoming in their professional relationships.

### **Sharing Authority**

The ways that MTs shared authority with residents offer another illustration of purposeful scaffolding based on shared experiences and an understanding of the needs and readiness of the learner. While student teaching is often characterized by a “gradual release of responsibility” (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), our analyses suggest that in a learner-centered mentoring approach, authority is shared through an intentional process designed around the individual teaching resident, not driven by time (e.g., in the last 4 weeks, the teacher candidate takes over the classroom) or an articulated continuum of learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

We find instances of four MTs—Elijah, Blake, Heather, and Emma—purposefully sharing authority: setting up the clinical experience so that pupils are aware that the resident has influence and thoughtfully considering what the resident was ready to take on based on his or her observations and professional knowledge. This ranged from positioning the resident as a “teacher” instead of a “student teacher” from the outset to more complex actions. For example, Elijah positioned his resident, who joined his class in the spring semester after her initial fall placement did not work out, as an authority from the start. The resident wrote in her student teaching journal,

It took me a week to get my bearings [at my new placement] and stop feeling intimidated by the size of my students. However, once I learned all the students’ names and Elijah involved me in the grading and attendance taking aspects of being a teacher, I became more confident and was able to introduce portions of a lesson. . . . The students have now begun to see me as someone who can help them with their work and are slowly viewing me as another figure of knowledge and authority in the classroom. I spoke to Elijah about this and we’ve decided to start with the coteaching format and work our way into a more singular role as the year progresses. This is a slight change from my roles at [my previous placement], but I feel it is a step in the right direction.

Elijah did this with intention, stating that since “she was grading almost all of the work, students knew that she was the one who was assessing them.” While one might assume that tasks such as taking attendance or grading are not central to instruction, or even to developing confidence, and that a teacher candidate might find them less interesting, Elijah saw that these tasks could quickly involve the resident in the classroom and would easily position her as a teaching authority, both in her own eyes and also in the eyes of the students. Our data suggest that this initial positioning was not common.

For some MT–resident pairs, sharing authority meant the MT provided a space for the resident’s reach to extend beyond the classroom into the larger school com-

munity. Blake's resident writes, for instance, about leading a coplanning meeting with the U.S. history teacher team, where he explained the sequence of lesson plans to them and then they collaboratively brainstormed and agreed on edits. Emma's resident writes about being encouraged to pitch her idea for a book study to the administration and suggested that Emma was extremely supportive and pushed her along. In these cases, MTs encouraged their residents to take risks, a reflection of their understanding of the residents' readiness and learning needs and observations of shared teaching experiences.

### **Modeling**

Clinical experiences provide opportunities for observation of, and immersion in, the practice of teaching. Indeed, teacher education programs anticipate that candidates will learn from the models their MTs provide (Clarke et al., 2014; Rozelle & Wilson, 2012). Although all of the MTs in this study utilized modeling as a means of teaching about practice, for some MTs, modeling was more of a sociocultural process (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that begins with observation of the resident and carefully considers scaffolds for participation based on perceived needs and readiness.

Five of the MTs in our sample clearly used modeling as a purposeful tool to scaffold the learning of their residents. For instance, in his self-assessment, Elijah describes making "the dependable and tangible procedures and expectations for my classes easily observable and accessible to residents." In so doing, he intentionally provides a foundation at the beginning from which his residents could learn. He also reports speaking with residents at length to deepen their understanding of instructional decision making based on challenges they were facing in the classroom. Heather, who taught in a self-contained class, worked with her resident around handling student behaviors. Initially, when a student became agitated, Heather would take the student outside for a mini-conference. The resident wrote in her student teaching journal that she had no idea what was happening in the hallway. After talking about it with Heather and observing Heather's interactions with individual students, the resident began asking students if they would like to talk with her in the hallway. While initially, many students preferred to talk with Heather, over time, they began to say yes to the resident, who reflected in her journal,

I have been working on classroom management by handling several students when they have been upset in the classroom. Heather has been by my side in the classroom when I talk to the student, and steps in if necessary, but otherwise lets me handle it. We are starting small and building up to me handling things on my own.

In reflecting on this, Heather noted that in the beginning, she was "sheltering [resident] from some of those behaviors" of the students, such as "a desk goes flying or, you know, they will try to run out of the school screaming." After the resident asked her what was going on in the hallway conversations, Heather began

encouraging her to take on more responsibility through a scaffolded process. With Heather by her side, the resident notes that she was supported in taking small steps over time, until “she was finally able to get them in the hallway to talk it through, develop a plan, and come back. And hopefully, she’ll be okay next year!” These are just two of numerous examples where MTs modeled practice intentionally to meet the learning needs of their residents, thus ensuring that modeling moved beyond demonstration or performance and became an opportunity for professional dialogue and learning.

Our analyses suggest, however, that the MTs in this study varied in terms of their intentionality when using modeling to support the learning of teaching residents. In some instances, such as in the example with Heather and her resident, we see evidence that modeling was used as a means for supporting the resident in taking ownership of a responsibility based on perceived readiness and interest; in others, modeling seems to have been used as a means of demonstrating practice solely for replication with fidelity, with no consideration of the resident’s current practice and trajectory toward independence. For example, Brittany described in a focus group, and in her self-assessment, asking residents to “mostly observe her teach the lesson and work in small groups” and teaching them discrete skills such as “how to make sure that we identify students’ reading levels properly using a running record.” She encourages them to “practice as I do” to be successful. She becomes notably uncomfortable when encouraged to work with residents outside of an approach centered on observation of her practice. Supporting residents in understanding how her instructional decisions are made, for instance, was overwhelming, as evidenced by her telling residents that she is “going to need time for herself” because she “finds it hard to concentrate when I have to stop and explain what I am doing while planning and grading.” She declares that she wants to have it all figured out before meeting with the resident, and that the appropriate time for the resident to become involved is only with the design of lesson activities. Brittany’s example is instructive in its illustration of beginning the learning process with modeling, as opposed to the needs of the learner. A learner-centered approach involves modeling as a means of teaching how to teach based on the resident’s readiness (e.g., Heather) and stands in contrast to a more traditional “observe-and-replicate” method that begins with, and is centered on, the needs, desires, and expertise of the MT.

### ***Progressive Vision***

Our explorations in this study reveal that showing vulnerability, sharing authority, and modeling, when they begin with the teacher candidate in mind, are practices that support a learner-centered approach to mentoring preservice teachers. Indeed, the MTs in this study varied by the degree to which these practices were leveraged as purposeful tools for teaching how to teach. Here we consider this variation through a fourth emergent theme: progressive vision.



*Progressive vision* describes a fundamental understanding that a teacher candidate is a learner and also a future colleague and experienced teacher. Such a perspective requires the mentor teacher to focus consciously on the learning of the individual teacher candidate as well as on his or her K–12 charges with the understanding that they are preparing both learners for the future, a phenomenon Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985) described as the “two worlds pitfall” (p. 59). Indeed, teachers are first and foremost responsible for the progress of their pupils and accountable for their achievement. Yet, the insertion of an adult learner—and an emerging novice-professional—into the classroom milieu calls upon MTs to divide their attention and to differentiate their instruction. At times, the MT needs to focus more on pupils, while at other times, the MT focuses on the teacher candidate—hence the term *progressive vision*. Not only are these learners different but the learning of one (the novice-professional) can have a positive or negative impact on the learning of the other (the K–12 student; Bullough, 2005). Thus the success of both learners is intertwined, making their learning an added imperative (and pressure) for the MT. In several ways, this concept rings similar to that described by Achinstein and Athanases (2005) in their discussion of “bifocal perspective” and to Schwille’s (2008) description of “bifocal vision” in the mentoring of novice teachers. Although our description of progressive vision shares similarities with bifocal perspective and vision, it is notable that these conceptions focus on the mentoring of teachers of record. Working with novice teachers of record means that the mentor is not held accountable for the achievement of the mentee’s K–12 students; Achinstein and Athanases’s (2005) bifocal perspective and Schwille’s (2008) bifocal vision hold the pupils’ needs in relief. In contrast, the MTs we describe here are working within high-accountability environments that require a constant negotiation between these two different kinds of learners and with tangible consequences for the mentor attached to student achievement.

Awareness of the teaching resident as an adult learner is the first dimension of progressive vision, evident for four of the six MTs in this study. For example, Elijah, in reflecting on his first year as a MT, stated,

She’s going to be a great teacher, and she is a great teacher from where she’s at right now. But she’s still a new teacher, and I think I have to myself keep that in mind that it takes time to really develop your craft, and there’s a lot of things that she does really, really well, and there’s a lot of things that she still struggles with. And I think just to get that into my mind as I go for next year with a new resident, that they can’t become maybe the ideal quality teacher in the time that they’re there.

Alongside this awareness, he implies that this approach to mentoring can be a struggle, expressing hope that he could be “more supportive, but sometimes defaults to having a sink-or-swim approach to mentoring residents.” Moreover, the demands of being a classroom teacher occasionally conflicted with his ideal approach to mentoring, illustrating the tensions inherent to being both a mentor and a classroom teacher.



Likewise, Blake reveals his awareness of the resident as a learner and a teacher, along with some dissatisfaction with his progress in this area, when he notes, “I need to be more supportive in my role as mentor and recognize that he is a student as well as an adult that needs positive reinforcement and explicit feedback about progress.” While he positioned this as an area for growth, nominators saw this awareness as an indicator of his effectiveness, noting, “Blake thinks deeply about each of his residents as adult learners and as beginning teachers, thoughtfully considering their strengths and needs, and how he can support their growth.” The notion of being responsive to the residents’ individual needs was echoed by Emma and Colleen, who both expressed the need to “be more flexible to meet the needs of residents.”

A second dimension of progressive vision is acknowledging teacher candidates’ experiences, agency, and funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and the value in incorporating them into the classroom. This was sometimes expressed as an actual practice or acknowledged as a good thing to aspire toward:

I needed to honor her voice even if I didn’t always agree. (Colleen)

This year I have been more cognizant of allowing the residents space to ask and attempt to answer their own questions. (Blake)

Though we have been able to incorporate her experience into the classroom quite a bit, I would like to continue to have [resident’s] voice, experience, and perspective heard increasingly more. (Emma)

Nominators saw this quality too, for example, in Elijah, who is “attentive to what the resident had to say, actively engaging in those conversations and using them as an opportunity to make plans for future lessons,” as well as did residents. One resident reflected, “What I appreciate most about Colleen is that she is always asking me for input and giving me chances to put my own ideas into the lesson.” Another wrote, “Emma is truly doing all she can to accommodate, include, and guide me.”

From our explorations of progressive vision, we have come to believe that it undergirds a learner-centered approach to mentoring and supports the mentor in focusing on the individual learning needs of the teacher candidate. The MTs’ ability to consistently act on their knowledge that the teacher candidates are moving toward being experienced professionals seems to vary depending on a number of factors, including the demands on their time as classroom teachers. One of these factors, the high-accountability school context in which they teach, has been shown to shape the extent to which mentors allow teacher candidates to practice the full range of teacher responsibilities (Kolman, Roegman, & Goodwin, 2015) and bears consideration in the analysis of these MTs’ work. For example, it is unclear if Colleen disagreed with her resident or whether Elijah sometimes provided “sink-or-swim” opportunities because of pressures for pupils to perform well on standardized tests. Indeed, many of the MTs describe the process of enacting their learner-centered vision as challenging, with intentions of doing more or differently for future residents.

## **Discussion**

What we present here is an emerging portrait of learner-centered mentoring, that is, an approach to mentoring preservice teachers that begins with, and is responsive to, their unique and individual learning needs. This should not suggest that these mentors did not exhibit characteristics of effective mentoring described in the literature. Indeed, they supported the learning of residents through demonstration and modeling (Clarke et al., 2014), enabling their mentees to replicate their effective teaching strategies and develop similarly positive teaching habits (Rozelle & Wilson, 2012). They also displayed other commonly described behaviors of effective mentors, such as working collaboratively with colleagues (Boreen et al., 2000), whether residents, residency supervisors, peer teachers, or program staff. In addition, these MTs consistently reflected on their practice (Cherian, 2007) and demonstrated their passion for teaching (Graham, 2006; Osunde, 1996). Consequently, they, along with the other MTs participating in the program, were able to provide residents with a successful student teaching experience, which allowed residents to learn through observation and from their example (Rozelle & Wilson, 2012).

However, these mentors perceived by most program staff to be effective in their work with residents seemed to stretch beyond teaching as primarily technical—moves that can be “caught” versus taught through modeling and then replicated with fidelity. They seemed also to define teaching as complex, uncertain, and contextually dependent, as evidenced by their interactions with their residents whereby they acknowledged the agency and thinking of the individual in teaching and focused on “accommodating personal needs” (Kennedy, 2016, p. 13). The MTs who demonstrated progressive vision appear cognizant of the larger picture and purposes of learning experiences (Schiro, 2013; Schwille, 2008; Weber, 1974). Thus their mentoring extended past a prescribed set of experiences to emphasize nurturing residents toward a vision of independent decision making and practice.

As illuminated by our study, showing vulnerability, sharing authority, modeling, and progressive vision can be responsive to candidates’ learning needs and readiness by building upon their knowledge and experiences (Clandinin, 2000; Schiro, 2013). Undoubtedly, these practices resonate with what all MTs do—they prepare teachers for future classrooms, open up their classrooms to another adult, and demonstrate both expertise and vulnerability through modeling. Yet, the mentoring practices of the teachers in our study revealed a fine difference that seemed to shift the pivotal point of the mentoring act from the mentor—what he or she does—to the mentee, or what the student teacher needs, brings, and must do. Thus, while there was variability in the extent to which each MT utilized these practices, what was common across most of them was their way of thinking about and defining mentoring that centered on the learner, not on the teaching. Thus learner-centered mentoring is less about engaging in certain practices with fidelity—we imagine that more research

would unearth many more possible practices that might fall along a spectrum of behaviors—and more about holding a learner-centered mind-set.

The one exception was Brittany, whose residents seem to have had fewer opportunities to practice beyond her expectations of replication and fidelity to her approaches. We found that her focus was consistently on the learning of her pupils but saw little evidence that she considered the individual resident as a learner with different needs, funds of knowledge, or goals. Moreover, reports by both Brittany and her residents suggest that they were not privy to her struggles—in fact, it was unclear that she identified any challenges within her own practice. This contrast between the practice of Brittany and the other five MTs—Emma, Blake, Elijah, Colleen, and Heather—is similar to what Valencia et al. (2009) found and aligns with Graham's (2006) distinction between *maestros* and *mentors*:

While maestros are excellent teachers who provide models of practice, mentors incorporate the role of teacher educator into their vision of cooperating teacher. Mentors consciously and carefully structure the clinical experience to nurture the professional growth and development of the intern. (p. 1122)

It is unclear the extent to which this may shape their practice as teachers of record, but our research suggests that Brittany's residents may construct their understandings of effective teaching as a finite set of "best practices" and may aim to replicate those practices in order to achieve effectiveness. Having a fixed mind-set, in contrast to a growth mind-set (Dweck, 2008), can be perilous to new teachers and potentially affect their retention in the profession as they struggle during their first years of teaching and beyond in different school contexts. More targeted research is needed to expand upon these questions.

While we see learner-centered mentoring as a promising approach in teacher education, it is also important to acknowledge the challenging policy context in which these mentors operate. The same year these mentors joined the program, New York State was awarded a Race to the Top (RTTT) grant<sup>5</sup> that mandated drastic changes for teachers and schools. Thus the profession was experiencing a great deal of turmoil as a consequence of initiatives driven by RTTT, particularly a new teacher and principal evaluation system and early adoption of Common Core Standards, which triggered changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessments. The MTs who collaborated with us are under tremendous pressure to increase test scores—standardized tests account for 40% of teachers' evaluations because of RTTT in the state—plus they face the added pressure of working in a diverse urban context with students who require academic and language supports and often do not fare well on standardized tests. The question, then, is not about Brittany and her mentoring style, which not only fits with conventions supported by the literature but seems a reasonable approach in high-accountability times. Rather, the question that begs addressing is about the ability of the five MTs who seemed able to balance the press of high-stakes testing and teacher performance, within a

challenging urban setting, with the learning (and stumbles) of neophyte teachers who can only approximate the quality of practice of their experienced mentors.

## **Implications for Teacher Education**

This concept of a learner-centered approach to mentoring preservice teachers provides a framework on which teacher education programs can build as they seek to strengthen their clinical components. Our goal is not to provide a prescriptive description of good mentoring but to highlight a set of practices in which mentors can engage to move toward a learner-centered approach. Rather than expecting mentors to implement these practices faithfully, we offer them as a starting point for thinking about effective mentoring that meets the needs of preservice teachers as learners. We are under no illusions that all MTs can or should engage in all of these practices, all the time.

Furthermore, our study calls into question whether MTs need to be the “best” teachers of children, as commonly sought out by teacher preparation programs. Brittany’s approach to mentoring is instructive here. Undoubtedly she is a strong teacher of children and has much to offer residents—members of the program team nominated her almost unanimously—and her residents learned much from working with her. Yet our research suggests that her residents had a different learning experience from their peers paired with more learner-centered mentors—one that seemed less responsive to their particular needs as learners. This positions Brittany as more likely to train new teachers in techniques and less likely to develop new teachers who routinely assess and reflect on their pedagogy. This is not to suggest that Brittany is merely a technician but rather that her mentoring practice means that preservice teachers learning from her can only do what she demonstrates, without the benefit of the thinking behind her practice.

At the same time that we see promise in learner-centered mentoring in preservice education, we recognize that this type of mentoring is not without its challenges. The Every Student Succeeds Act (2016) ushers us into uncharted territory, and it is unclear precisely how it might impact mentoring, particularly in high-accountability schools. Of greatest risk is that mentors do not know teacher candidates well enough to determine what types of instructional practices they are ready for or are not well informed enough about new teacher development to mediate the right types of experiences for their residents. In studies of mentors and new teachers, Bullough (2005) has found “a hesitancy on the part of mentors to interfere with novices’ autonomy” (p. 26). In this study, we see several instances of residents asking MTs for increased responsibilities, which their MTs might have interpreted as readiness, and then acted upon by intentionally considering the next set of practices for their residents to take on. Although this is integral to many approaches to learner-centered pedagogy (Schiro, 2013), we wonder what would have happened if these residents had not asked. Would the MTs have not perceived them as ready? At the

same time, for residents who have great confidence but emerging skill, might the MT give too much responsibility?

In this sense, just as learner-centered teachers need time and practice to develop their skill, so too do MTs. This is a call for preparation programs to support MTs to assess their mentees' skills and knowledge with/of various teaching practices to determine next steps. This means providing mentors with information about teacher development, utilizing funds of knowledge, and introducing the importance of vulnerability. At the same time, preparation programs can consider the mind-set of learner-centered mentoring in recruitment—instead of looking for the “best” models of good teaching, programs may be better suited to look for experienced teachers who are comfortable admitting mistakes, learning from them, and sharing them with their candidates.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>2</sup> High-need secondary schools are defined by the government as having over 45% of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of the study, the program had only graduated three cohorts of residents.

<sup>4</sup> Of the initial eight mentoring standards, seven are examined in this study.

<sup>5</sup> <http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/>

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